SŪRAH 73

Al-Muzzammil

(The Enfolded One)

Prologue

A report in connection with the revelation of this *sūrah* suggests that the Quraysh elders held a meeting in Dār al-Nadwah, a place where they normally gathered, in order to discuss any momentous event. This time they were discussing their strategy as regards the Prophet and the message he advocated. When the Prophet heard of this meeting, he was distressed. He wrapped himself in his clothes, covered himself and went to sleep. The Angel Gabriel then brought him the first passage of this *sūrah*, comprising 19 verses, with the command to stay up in worship at night. Its final part, consisting of Verse 20, was delayed for a full year, during which the Prophet and some of his Companions attended to their night worship until their legs were swollen from the effort. Only then was the *sūrah*'s second part revealed reducing their burden.

Another report also tells of the occasion of this *sūrah*'s revelation, but it also applies to the revelation of the next *sūrah*, Wrapped in Cloak, as we will mention in our discussion there, God willing. In summary, this report mentions that three years before the start of his message, the Prophet used to go to a cave in Mount Ḥirā', about two miles from Makkah, where he spent the month of Ramaḍān in worship. In this way, his family were not far from him, enabling him to stay in the cave for the whole month. Here, he would feed any poor person who happened

to pass by, and spend the rest of his time in worship and contemplation. His thoughts would go to the universe and its amazing scenes, suggesting that it is the creation of a great power. He was unhappy with the flimsy beliefs of his people who were idolaters. Yet he had no clear vision or thoughts. No consistent line presented itself to him.

This seclusion was an aspect of how God guided him, indeed, prepared him, for the great task which was later to be assigned him. He was alone, away from the hassle of life and its preoccupations. He just wanted to broaden his scope, feel the beauty of the universe and try to understand what message it imparts to a clear mind. Whoever is chosen to carry out the task of influencing and changing the direction of humanity needs such seclusion where he is free from life's minor concerns and preoccupations. He certainly needs a period of contemplation when he can look at the open universe and try to understand the truth it signifies. When a person is attending to life's concerns, he finds himself in a familiar environment, which he will complacently accept. He does not think of changing it. It is only moving away from the immediate environment and its concerns that gives the soul its ability to discern what is not readily apparent. Seclusion provides the training ground to appreciate the world around us, without reference to prevailing concepts.

This is, then, what God designed for Muḥammad as He prepared him to shoulder the greatest trust. It would be his task to change the direction of human life and thus the world. For three years before the start of his mission, God sent the Prophet into seclusion for one month every year.

When God willed to bestow this great aspect of His grace on the dwellers of the earth, the Angel Gabriel went to the Prophet Muḥammad in the cave at Ḥirā'. The Prophet gives this report about what then took place:

> The Prophet said: "While I was asleep he came to me carrying a case of a very rich material in which there was a book. He said: 'Read.' I replied: 'I am not a reader.' He pressed me so hard that I felt that I was about to die. Then he released me and said, 'Read.' I asked: 'What shall I read?' (I said this only out of fear that he

might repeat what he had done to me before.) He said: 'Read: in the name of Your Lord Who created. It is He Who created man from a clinging cell mass . Read! Your Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who has taught the use of the pen. He has taught man what he did not know.' (96: 1–5) I read it. He stopped. Then he left me and went away. I woke up feeling that it was actually written in my heart."

The Prophet went on to say: "When I was halfway up the mountain, I heard a voice coming from the heavens saying: 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.' I raised my head up to the sky and I saw Gabriel in the image of a man with his feet next to one another up on the horizon. He said again: 'Muḥammad, you are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel.' I stood in my place looking up at him; this distracted me from my intention. I was standing there unable to move. I tried to turn my face away from him and to look up at the sky, but wherever I looked I saw him in front of me. I stood still, moving neither forward nor backward. Khadījah sent her messengers looking for me and I remained standing in my place all the while until they went back to her. He then left me and I went back to my family. When I reached home I sat next to Khadījah, leaning on her. She said: 'Where have you been? I sent people after you and they went to the outskirts of Makkah looking for you.' I told her of what happened, and she said: 'Rejoice! By God, I was certain that God would bring you only what is good. I certainly hope that you are the Prophet of this nation.'[1]

The revelation stopped for a while, and then when the Prophet went again to the mountain, he looked up and saw the Angel Gabriel. He was overwhelmed with such a shudder that he fell to the ground. He then hurriedly went home, saying to his family: 'Cover me! Wrap me.' They did so. He continued to shiver, so great was his fear. Then Gabriel called him: "*You enfolded one!*" (Verse 1) It is also reported that Gabriel

1. Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, pp. 67–72.

called him: "*You wrapped in your cloak.*" (74: 1) God knows best which of these statements was expressed.

Regardless of whether the first or the second report about this *sūrah*'s revelation is correct, the Prophet learnt that from now on he would only have a little sleep. He had a heavy duty to shoulder, requiring a long struggle. He was always to be on the alert, ready to work hard with little or no rest. The Prophet was told to stay up, and he did, for more than 20 years. He never slackened, but devoted himself completely to his message, attending to its requirements. He shouldered his very heavy burden without complaint. It was the burden of the greatest trust of all, the divine faith and the hard struggle it required.

His first area of struggle was the human mind burdened as it was with a great heap of erroneous concepts, wrong ideas and shackled with personal desires and earthly attractions. When he had purged the minds of some of his Companions of this heavy burden, another battle in a different field beckoned. In fact, this was to culminate in a series of battles against the enemies of the divine message, who marshalled their forces to crush the new message and supplant its tree before it could establish roots and send out its branches. He had hardly finished with these battles in the Arabian Peninsula when the Byzantine Empire began to prepare itself to deal a heavy defeat against this fledgling Islamic state in Arabia.

Yet throughout this long struggle, the first battle for the human mind was not over. This is a permanent battle against Satan who does not stop even for a moment in his attempts to lure people. Regardless, the Prophet continued to nurture God's message, living in poverty when great riches were available to him, putting in strenuous efforts whilst his Companions enjoyed comfort and security. His was a continuous and hard struggle, one that required patience, perseverance, night worship, recitation of the Qur'ān and the permanent pursuit of God's pleasure. It was a full implementation of divine orders: "*You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. We shall bestow on you a weighty message. The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly*

to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian. Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity." (Verses 1–10) Thus did Muḥammad stand in prayer, and thus did he continue to fight a raging battle for over 20 years. He let nothing distract him from this. From the moment he heard the divine call assigning his duty to him he remained focused on his task. May God reward him with His best reward.

The first half of the *sūrah* maintains the same rhythm, and almost the same rhyme, with an 'l' followed by a long 'a', throughout. It gives the *sūrah* a relaxed but courtly beat, one that suits its majestic command, the seriousness of the duty and the successive and momentous images the *sūrah* portrays. These include the weighty message and the frightening warning: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering.*" (Verses 11–13) There are also the awesome images drawn from the great universe and from the depths of the human soul: "*on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand.*" (Verse 14) "*How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.*" (Verses 17–18)

The long verse that comes at the end of the *sūrah* was revealed a whole year later, during which time the Prophet and some of those who followed him maintained night worship for much of the night, every night. This was an aspect of their preparation for the role God wanted them to play. When this year had passed, the order of night worship was relaxed, but this relaxation was coupled with the reassurance that it was God's choice for them, according to His knowledge and wisdom, taking into account the duties He had assigned to them. This verse runs in a different style: it is long, with a varied, calm and steady lilt. The ending, with its 'm' preceded by a long 'e', perfectly suits this steady calmness.

In its two parts, the *sūrah* portrays a stage of the Islamic message, beginning with the address from on high outlining the heavy assignment. It describes the preparation for this heavy duty by night worship, constant prayer, recitation of the Qur'ān, and glorifying God, relying

on Him alone, enduring hardship with forbearance, withdrawing with dignity from the unbelievers and leaving them to God Almighty, to whom the message belongs and who conducts the battle. The *sūrah* ends with a kindly touch, relieving some of the burden and lightening the duty, with a directive to attend to voluntary tasks that earn His reward. Finally, it holds out the prospect of God granting forgiveness and bestowing grace: "*God is Much Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 20) The *sūrah* as a whole represents a stage in the noble efforts made by that chosen community to return erring humanity to its Lord, enduring all the hardship involved and looking for no gain in this life.

Al-Muzzammil
(The Enfolded One)

سُورَةُ المُزَّمِّل

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

You enfolded one! (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُزَّمِّلُ ﴿١﴾

Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, (2)

قُمِ اللَّيْلَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٢﴾

half of it, or a little less, (3)

نِّصْفَهُ أَوِ انقُصْ مِنْهُ قَلِيلًا ﴿٣﴾

or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. (4)

أَوْ زِدْ عَلَيْهِ وَرَتِّلِ الْقُرْآنَ تَرْتِيلًا ﴿٤﴾

We shall bestow on you a weighty message. (5)

إِنَّا سَنُلْقِي عَلَيْكَ قَوْلًا ثَقِيلًا ﴿٥﴾

The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. (6)

إِنَّ نَاشِئَةَ اللَّيْلِ هِيَ أَشَدُّ وَطْئًا وَأَقْوَمُ قِيلًا ﴿٦﴾

During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. (7)

إِنَّ لَكَ فِي النَّهَارِ سَبْحًا طَوِيلًا ﴿٧﴾

Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. (8)

وَاذْكُرِ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ وَتَبَتَّلْ إِلَيْهِ تَبْتِيلًا ﴿٨﴾

رَبُّ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ
فَاتَّخِذْهُ وَكِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian. (9)

وَاصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَاهْجُرْهُمْ
هَجْرًا جَمِيلًا ﴿١٠﴾

Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity. (10)

وَذَرْنِي وَالْمُكَذِّبِينَ أُولِي النَّعْمَةِ
وَمَهِّلْهُمْ قَلِيلًا ﴿١١﴾

Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. (11)

إِنَّ لَدَيْنَا أَنكَالًا وَجَحِيمًا ﴿١٢﴾

We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, (12)

وَطَعَامًا ذَا غُصَّةٍ وَعَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٣﴾

food that chokes and painful suffering (13)

يَوْمَ تَرْجُفُ الْأَرْضُ وَالْجِبَالُ وَكَانَتِ
الْجِبَالُ كَثِيبًا مَّهِيلًا ﴿١٤﴾

on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand. (14)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْكُمْ رَسُولًا شَاهِدًا عَلَيْكُمْ
كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ رَسُولًا ﴿١٥﴾

We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. (15)

فَعَصَىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ الرَّسُولَ فَأَخَذْنَاهُ
أَخْذًا وَبِيلًا ﴿١٦﴾

Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment. (16)

فَكَيْفَ تَتَّقُونَ إِن كَفَرْتُمْ يَوْمًا يَجْعَلُ
الْوِلْدَانَ شِيبًا ﴿١٧﴾

How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? (17)

ٱلسَّمَآءُ مُنفَطِرٌۢ بِهِۦ ۚ كَانَ وَعْدُهُۥ
مَفْعُولًا ﴿١٨﴾

That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled. (18)

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِۦ تَذْكِرَةٌ ۖ فَمَن شَآءَ ٱتَّخَذَ
إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ سَبِيلًا ﴿١٩﴾

This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord. (19)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَعْلَمُ أَنَّكَ تَقُومُ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ثُلُثَيِ ٱلَّيْلِ
وَنِصْفَهُۥ وَثُلُثَهُۥ وَطَآئِفَةٌ مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ مَعَكَ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ يُقَدِّرُ ٱلَّيْلَ وَٱلنَّهَارَ ۚ عَلِمَ أَن لَّن
تُحْصُوهُ فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَٱقْرَءُوا۟ مَا تَيَسَّرَ
مِنَ ٱلْقُرْءَانِ ۚ عَلِمَ أَن سَيَكُونُ مِنكُم
مَّرْضَىٰ ۙ وَءَاخَرُونَ يَضْرِبُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
يَبْتَغُونَ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ ۙ وَءَاخَرُونَ
يُقَٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَٱقْرَءُوا۟ مَا تَيَسَّرَ
مِنْهُ ۚ وَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ
وَأَقْرِضُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا ۚ وَمَا تُقَدِّمُوا۟

Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers. It is God who determines the measure of night and day. He is aware that you will not be able to keep a measure of it, and therefore He turns towards you in His grace. Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you. He knows that some of you will be sick, others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty, and others will be fighting for God's cause. Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease. Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity [i.e. *zakāt*], and give God a goodly loan. Whatever good

you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (20)

لِأَنفُسِكُم مِّنْ خَيْرٍ تَجِدُوهُ عِندَ اللَّهِ هُوَ خَيْرًا وَأَعْظَمَ أَجْرًا ۚ وَاسْتَغْفِرُوا اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

The One Enfolded

> *You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly. We shall bestow on you a weighty message. The night hours are strongest of tread and most upright of speech. During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to. Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian.* (Verses 1–9)

"*You enfolded one! Stand...*" This is a call from on high, given by God Almighty. Stand, for you have a great mission and a heavy burden. Stand, for you need to put in sustained efforts. Stand, for the time of sleep and comfort is over. You need to prepare for the task ahead of you.

This is an awesome command requiring the Prophet to pull himself out from the warmth of his bed in a comfortable home and with a happy family life so as to place himself in the midst of a hard struggle, with different forces pulling him here and there. A man who lives for himself may find comfort and ease, but he lives small and dies small. The noble soul who shoulders such a heavy burden has a different perspective: what has he got to do with sleep, comfort, a warm bed and an easy life? The Prophet realized and accepted this. When his wife, Khadījah, once told him to go to bed and relax, he said to her: "The time for sleep has passed." Yes, indeed. He had nothing more than long nights and a long struggle ahead of him.

"*You enfolded one! Stand in prayer at night, all but a small part of it, half of it, or a little less, or add to it. Recite the Qur'ān calmly and*

distinctly." (Verses 1–4) Such is the preparation for the great task. It uses divine methods, which are guaranteed to succeed. The method is night worship, which on the higher level of remembrance of God takes up more than half the night but less than two-thirds, and on the lower level, but still in complete remembrance of Him, takes one-third of the night. This long time should be spent in prayer and recitation of the Qur'ān, aloud but with calmness and without singing. It is authentically reported that the Prophet prayed his *Witr* in no more than 11 *rak'ahs*, but these took up nearly two-thirds of the night, and he read at length from the Qur'ān.

"Sa'īd ibn Hishām reports that he asked Ibn 'Abbās how the Prophet prayed *Witr*. He said: 'Shall I tell you who of all people knows this best?' He said: 'Yes.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'Go and ask 'Ā'ishah and then come back and tell me her answer'." Sa'īd continues: "I said to her: 'Mother of the believers, tell me what was the Prophet like in his manners?' She said: 'Do you not read the Qur'ān?' I said I did. She said: 'His manners were as the Qur'ān says.' I was about to leave, but then I thought of the Prophet's night worship, so I said: 'Mother of the believers, tell me how the Prophet offered his night worship.' She said: 'Do you not read the *sūrah* starting with, *You enfolded one!*' I said I did. She said: 'God made night worship obligatory at the opening of the *sūrah*, and the Prophet and his Companions offered night worship until their feet were swollen. God retained the end of that *sūrah* with Himself for 12 months, then the relaxation was given. Thus, night worship became voluntary after it had been obligatory.' I was about to rise, but then I remembered *Witr*, and I said to her: 'Mother of the believers, tell me how the Prophet offered *Witr*.' She said: 'We used to prepare for him his tooth stick and the water for his ablutions. He would rise at night, as God wished, and he would use his tooth stick to brush his teeth, then would perform his ablution. He would offer eight *rak'ahs* without sitting in between until he had completed the eighth *rak'ah*. He would then sit down and glorify God and supplicate, then he would stand before ending his prayer, to offer his ninth *rak'ah*. He would sit glorifying God alone, then supplicating. He would then finish his prayer with *Salām*. He said it aloud so that we would hear it. He then prayed two *rak'ahs* sitting down. Thus he would complete 11 *rak'ahs*. When he was older and put on some weight, he

would pray *Witr* in seven *rak'ahs* and do two *rak'ahs* seated to complete nine. When the Prophet offered some voluntary prayers he liked to keep this up. If something distracted him from night worship, such as sleep or illness, he would offer 12 *rak'ahs* during the day. I know that the Prophet never read the whole of the Qur'ān in one night up to the morning, and I know that he never fasted a complete month other than Ramaḍān'." [Related by Aḥmad and Muslim.][2]

A Heavy Weight to Carry

All these preparations were made so that the Prophet could receive the weighty discourse: "*We shall bestow on you a weighty message.*" (Verse 5) This is a reference to the Qur'ān and the assignment it gives the Prophet. The Qur'ān is not weighty in its phraseology; on the contrary, it is both easy to bear in mind and recite. However, it is weighty in the scales of truth, and profound in its effect on people's hearts: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (59: 21) Instead, God sent down the Qur'ān to a man's heart, which received it and was steadier than a mountain.

Receiving such an overflow of light and knowledge and understanding it is certainly a weighty task. Dealing with great universal truths as they are is weighty indeed. Likewise, to be in contact with those on high and with the spirits of animate and inanimate creatures in the manner the Prophet was is also weighty. Moreover, to undertake this mission without hesitation and not to turn away here or there in response to temptation is mightily weighty. All this certainly requires long preparation.

Standing up in night worship when others are asleep, leaving aside the distractions of daily life, being in contact with God, receiving His light and bounty, seeking the pleasure of being alone with Him, reciting the Qur'ān in the deep silence of the night as if it is being bestowed now from on high so as to be echoed by the whole universe, and receiving

2. There are many *ahadith* and reports describing the Prophet's night prayer and his *Witr*, which show that the Prophet varied these prayers. For a full discussion, refer to *Zad al-Ma'ād* by Ibn al-Qayyim, in which a chapter is devoted to describing the Prophet's night worship.

inspiration from the Qur'ān and its melody in the quiet of the night... is all part of the preparation. It provides the necessary preparedness to shoulder the weighty task and undertake the sustained and strenuous efforts required of the Prophet and anyone who advocates the message of Islam. It enlightens advocates' hearts along their hard way, protecting them from Satan's whispering and temptations, and guiding their footsteps so that they do not fall into the dark maze that stands adjacent to this shining road.

"*The night hours that are strongest of tread and most upright of speech.*" (Verse 6) The night hours referred to here are those that follow the *Isha* Prayer. This verse describes these hours as '*strongest of tread*', which means more physically exhausting, and '*most upright of speech*', which means better rewarding, [according to Mujāhid]. To overcome the appeal of bed after a long day is exhausting, but it declares the triumph of the spirit in response to God's instructions. Since the person spending these hours in worship prefers to be in contact with God, these hours are most upright of speech, because they give a special taste to God's glorification. They make prayer more enlightening, and supplication more transparent. They fill the heart with light and happiness that may not be felt in day prayers. God, who created man and his heart, knows how it responds, what it takes in, how it opens to callers, and at which times it is more responsive and better prepared.

When God wanted to prepare His servant and Messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), for his weighty message, He chose for him night worship because the night hours are the ones that are strongest of tread, producing the most profound impression, and most upright of speech. God knows that during the day he had to attend to different tasks that took up much of his energy. "*During the day you have a long chain of things to attend to.*" (Verse 7) Let him, then, do whatever he needs to do during the day, putting in whatever effort was necessary. When the night comes, however, he should devote himself to his Lord, offering prayer and glorifying Him: "*Therefore, remember your Lord's name and devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him.*" (Verse 8)

Remembering God's name does not mean repeating His honoured name verbally, counting with a bead of one hundred or a thousand pieces. Rather, this is a heart-felt remembrance along with verbal mention, or

it means prayer and reading the Qur'ān while praying. Wholehearted devotion means concentrating all one's attention on God, addressing one's worship to Him, discarding all thoughts and feelings other than the bond with Him.

The *sūrah* follows this instruction by making it clear that there is none other than God to turn to: "*He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no deity other than Him. Take Him for your guardian.*" (Verse 9) He is the Lord of all, the One God other than whom there is no deity. To devote oneself to Him is to be with the only truth in the universe, and to place one's trust in Him is to place it in the only power in the universe. Such reliance on Him is the natural result of believing in His oneness and His control of the east and the west, or in other words, His control of the entire universe. The Prophet, who is told to stand in order to carry his heavy burden, needs to devote himself wholeheartedly to God and to rely on Him only. It is from this that he derives the strength necessary to carry his heavy burden along his long way.

Flattened Mountains

God then directs His Messenger to remain content and patient in the face of all opposition and false accusation, telling him to leave those people who so behave to Him to deal with:

> *Endure with patience what people may say, and leave their company with noble dignity. Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while. We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering on the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand. We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment. How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder. God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.* (Verses 10–18)

If the first report concerning the revelation of this *sūrah*'s opening is correct and that it took place during the early days of the Islamic message, this means that this second passage was revealed later, after the call to Islam went public and began to encounter opposition from those who denied it. Some of these were arrogant in their opposition, speaking ill of the Prophet and the believers. If, on the other hand, the second report is more accurate, then the first part of the *sūrah* was revealed in full when the Prophet was at the receiving end of the unbelievers' determined opposition to his message. Be that as it may, we see that the directive to remain patient comes after the one to attend to night worship and engage in glorifying God. These two instructions are often given together with the aim of reinforcing the advocates of the divine message with the help they need along their long journey. These advocates contend with difficulties both from within themselves and from outside by the opponents of Islam. Both types of difficulty are extremely hard to deal with. Hence, the first directive is to remain patient: "*Endure with patience what people may say*", which may be infuriating. Next comes a similarly magnanimous directive: "*And leave their company with noble dignity.*" (Verse 10) No need for any remonstration, showing anger, friction or hostility. Such was the policy of the Islamic message in Makkah, particularly in the early days. It was only an address to hearts and minds, putting the truth before people in a calm and dignified way.

This policy of leaving the company of arrogant opponents with noble dignity is not easy; it requires patience in addition to remembrance and glorification of God. Patience was enjoined by God on every one of His messengers, time after time, and enjoined on His servants who believed in His messengers. No one can dedicate himself to God's message unless he makes patience his main resort, equipment and armament. Advocacy of the divine message is a hard struggle. It requires striving against one's own weaknesses, distractions, desires, haste and despair, and striving against the opponents of the message, their schemes, plots as well as the harm they may directly seek to inflict on the message and its supporters. It also involves striving against general trends to abandon the divine message and its duties, and to disregard its values while paying lip-service to it. Facing such a struggle, an advocate of Islam can resort to nothing

other than patience. Turning to God and glorifying Him goes hand in hand with patience in almost every situation.

So, the Prophet is instructed to endure with patience whatever is said against his message and to leave with noble dignity the company of those who are so hostile to it, leaving them to God to deal with: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth and enjoy the comforts of this life. Bear with them for a little while.*" (Verse 11) This is said by none other than the Almighty, who has control of all forces. It is He who says: "*Leave to Me those who deny the truth.*" They are only ordinary people while this threat is issued by the One who originated them and created this vast universe needing for the purpose nothing more than to say, '*Be*'. God is saying here that the message is His own, so those who deny it should be left to Him, while the Prophet should carry on with his task of delivering the message. If they want to persist in their denial, then let them do so, but leave their company with noble dignity. It is God who will take care of them and foil their designs. The Prophet need not think further about them.

The warning is terrifying and stunning. It implies that the Almighty will deal with such petty people. They "*may enjoy the comforts of this life*", but they remain powerless in front of Him, no matter how despotic they may be in this world.

"*Bear with them for a little while.*" (Verse 11) If he were to bear with them for the length of life on earth, this would still only represent '*a little while*', because this life is in God's measure only a day or a part of a day. Indeed, it will seem thus to them when it is over. On the Day of Judgement, they will feel that it was no more than an hour of a day. So, it remains '*a little while*' no matter how long this may be; even if they depart this life in safety, without being punished in this world.

"*We have heavy fetters and a blazing fire, food that chokes and painful suffering.*" (Verses 12–13) All these are fitting requitals for those who enjoy a life of comfort in this world but who continue to deny the divine message. They do not appreciate what they are given; nor do they give due thanks for the comforts they enjoy. Therefore, you, Muḥammad, bear with patience what they say and do, and leave them to Me. We have what they deserve: heavy fetters, a blazing fire, food that is so hard to swallow and a painful suffering on a day that fills everyone with fear.

An image of that day and the fear it spreads is then drawn: "*On the day when the earth and the mountains will shake, and the mountains will crumble into heaps of shifting sand.*" (Verse 14) The feeling of fear transcends all people to spread over the whole earth: it thus shudders and crashes, with the great mountains crumbling into heaps of sand. How, then, will humans react?

Having given this scary image, the *sūrah* addresses those unbelievers who enjoy a life of luxury reminding them of a great tyrant, Pharaoh, and how God swept him away: "*We have sent you a Messenger to be your witness, just as We sent a messenger to Pharaoh. Pharaoh disobeyed the messenger, and so We inflicted on him a severe punishment.*" (Verses 15–16) The terrible end suffered by Pharaoh is given in such a brief word that it strikes even more fear into their hearts, and this after the scene depicting the earth shaking and the mountains flattened.

These are two images of punishment, one in this life and one in the hereafter. How do those unbelievers think they will be saved from such punishment? "*How will you, if you continue to disbelieve, guard yourselves against a day that will turn children's hair grey? That is the day when the skies shall be rent asunder.*" (Verses 17–18) This is an image of a fearful event that leaves the sky rent asunder, after the earth and the mountains have crumbled into sand. It turns children's hair grey. The images of this terrifying event are drawn from a silent landscape as well as a living humanity. The *sūrah* portrays these images before the addressees as if they are taking place now. It then confirms this most emphatically: "*God's promise will certainly be fulfilled.*" (Verse 18) It is happening, no doubt. Whatever God wills is certain to be done.

Now the *sūrah* gives their hearts a gentle touch so that they may remember and choose the road to safety: "*This is but a reminder. Let him who will, take the way to his Lord.*" (Verse 19) The way to God is safer and easier to traverse. It spares people such a terrible outcome.

The verses carrying these warnings strike the unbelievers hard. They shake them violently, leaving them in great fear. At the same time, they provide strengthening reassurance to the Prophet and his small group of followers. They feel that God is with them, punishing their enemies. It is only but a short while and the appointed time will arrive. The matter will then be settled. God will take His enemies, who are their

enemies, and put them to the fate they deserve. God does not abandon the believers to His enemies, even though He may give His enemies respite for a while.

A Hard Duty is Relaxed

Then comes the second part of the *sūrah*, consisting of a single, long verse that was revealed one year after the first part, according to the more authentic reports:

> *Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers. It is God who determines the measure of night and day. He is aware that you will not be able to keep a measure of it, and therefore He turns towards you in His grace. Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you. He knows that some of you will be sick, others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty, and others will be fighting for God's cause. Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease. Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity* [*i.e.* zakāt], *and give God a goodly loan. Whatever good you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward. Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 20)

This is a compassionate touch, providing relief after much fatigue. It is a relaxation by God granted to the Prophet and the believers, when they have proved themselves to be dedicated totally to His divine message. They were exhausted after having stood up for long hours at night offering prayers in which very long passages of the Qur'ān were recited. God never wanted to afflict His Prophet with the Qur'ān, putting him to such hardship. Rather, He was only preparing him for the hard task that he was to undertake for the rest of his life. The believers who followed him would also have to share in this heavy burden.

The verse starts with friendly reassurance: "*Your Lord knows that you stand in prayer nearly two-thirds of the night, or one-half or a third of it, as do some of your followers.*" (Verse 20) He has seen you doing it, and what you and your Companions offered of night worship has

been accepted and entered in God's records. He knows that you have abandoned your beds, warm as they are on a cold night, preferring to listen to His directives. He is Compassionate towards you and those who are with you. "*It is God who determines the measure of night and day.*" (Verse 20) He causes the one to be longer and the other to be shorter. Thus, the night may get longer or shorter, but you are all carrying on with the duty required of you, staying up close to two-thirds of the night, or half of it, or even a third. He is aware of your weakness. He does not want to afflict you or put you to unbearable hardship; all He wants is that you should have the necessary training. Now that you have been trained, you can relax and take things easier: "*Recite of the Qur'ān as much as may be easy for you,*" during your night worship, without putting yourselves to much difficulty. God knows that things will happen to you and drain your energy, making standing long into the night worshipping too hard: "*He knows that some of you will be sick,*" and these cannot offer night worship. "*Others will go about in the land seeking God's bounty.*" (Verse 20) These need to attend to their work and earn their living. This is essential. God does not want people to abandon their life's needs and lead the life of a monk who is totally devoted to worship. "*And others will be fighting for God's cause.*" (Verse 20) God will permit you to stand up and fight against those who wage aggression against you. He will permit you to fight so that Islam will have its safe and sovereign place. You may, then, relax and approach your duty in a comfortable way: "*Therefore, recite whatever you may do with ease.*" (Verse 20) Let there be no exhaustion or hardship. However, you must attend to all obligatory worship: "*Attend regularly to prayer, pay your obligatory charity* [*i.e.* zakāt]." (Verse 20) When you have done this you may wish to add voluntary charity, which will increase your reward: "*And give God a goodly loan. Whatever good you may offer on your own behalf, you shall find it with God to be better and richer in reward.*" (Verse 20) Turn to God, appealing for forgiveness of your shortcomings. Man remains short of what is needed, no matter how diligent he tries to be. "*Seek God's forgiveness, for God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 20)

This is a compassionate touch, providing relaxation and reassurance after a whole year of night worship. God relaxed this duty for Muslims,

making night worship voluntary, rather than an obligatory duty. The Prophet, however, continued on the same lines, offering night worship for no less than one-third of the night. He would appeal to his Lord in the depths of the night, and receive from Him what he needed for his struggle in life. Although his eyes might sleep, his heart would not. His heart was always busy with God's remembrance. It had no desire for anything else in this life.